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## The New York Times

# Census Considers How to Measure a More Diverse America



**Mustafa Asmar, a Palestinian-American, is a waiter in Paterson, N.J.**  
Matt Rainey / *The New York Times*

**By TANZINA VEGA, July 1, 2014**

When Alexa Aviles received her census form in 2010, she was frustrated by the choices. Like all Hispanics, Ms. Aviles, a Puerto Rican who lives in Brooklyn, was first asked to identify her ethnicity and then to answer a question about her race. Ms. Aviles, 41, who works for a nonprofit, thought, “I’m all of these!” In annoyance, she checked Hispanic, and then identified herself as white, black and “some other race.”

Mustafa Asmar, a Palestinian-American waiter in Paterson, N.J., does not like his options either. Arab-Americans are broadly classified as white in the census. “When you fill out white or other, it doesn’t really represent the Middle Eastern population,” said Mr. Asmar, 25. “I don’t feel like I’m white. I don’t know what else to put.”

As the United States becomes more diverse, the Census Bureau is grappling with how to accurately classify race and ethnicity in its next decennial count in 2020. It is an issue that plays out in divergent ways for different groups. Many Hispanics, like Ms. Aviles, are frustrated that they are prompted to select from racial categories that they believe do not represent their identity.



**Hector R. Cordero-Guzman is a professor at the School of Public Affairs at Baruch College.**  
Ruby Washington / *The New York Times*

Many Arabs have the opposite concern: They are not asked a separate ethnicity question and are typically categorized as white, a label that many feel does not apply.

Of the 47.6 million people who classified themselves as being of Hispanic or Latino origin on the 2010 census, 30.5 percent also considered themselves “some other race.” Many emphasized their Hispanic heritage by writing in “Mexican,” “Hispanic,” “Latin American” or “Puerto Rican” to specify what they meant. An additional 13 percent declined to provide a race at all.

As a result, the bureau is considering modifying the Hispanic question for the 2020 census. Respondents could continue to select as many race categories as they wanted, but Hispanics would no longer be prompted to check a racial category. That pleases many Hispanics, but in a sign of how complicated the issue is, it has raised concerns among some black Latinos who say that not prompting a response on race “helps enforce the myth of a monolithic Latinidad,” said Guesnerth Perea, the communications coordinator of the Afro Latino Forum, a nonprofit cultural group.

“The concern is about erasure,” he continued. “Who gets recognized and who doesn’t get recognized.” Of the Hispanics who did name a race in 2010, 47.4 percent reported “white” while 2.1 reported percent “black.”

A Hispanic origin question has been part of the census since 1970, and the question has evolved each decade in an attempt to more accurately reflect the growing Hispanic demographic, census officials said. Answers to those questions have also shifted.

A recent New York Times article on preliminary research from the 2000 and 2010 censuses, which showed some Hispanics switched the answer to the race question from “some other race” to “white” and some switched from “white” to “some other race,” was criticized by some Hispanics for not understanding the fluidity of Hispanic identity. The critiques set off a flurry of opinion articles across the country about Hispanic identity as well as a Twitter campaign called #WhatLatinosLookLike, in which Hispanics posted photos of themselves to show their diversity of skin color, hair texture, and racial and economic backgrounds.

“It’s not that the people are confused; it’s that the question is inexact,” said Hector R. Cordero-Guzman, a professor at the School of Public Affairs at Baruch College, of the decision by many Latinos to choose “some other race” or no race at all. “If you are asking somebody simply what their skin color is — that’s how some people understand the question. Some people say they are asking me about my ancestry. Others think they are asking me about how I’m treated when I go outside.”

Arab-Americans are generally categorized as white in the census, something activist groups and academics have been lobbying to change. A letter to the Census Bureau last July, submitted by the Arab American Institute and co-signed by a number of organizations and academics, asked for an ethnic category box to be added to the census form to cover people from the Middle East and North Africa. The letter said an estimated two-thirds of people from the region do not consider themselves white.

Census officials said they were considering testing an ethnic category box for Arab-Americans in advance of the 2020 census.

“We want to get away from that binary where you’re either one of these races or you’re nothing,” said Helen Hatab Samhan, a member of the Arab American Institute’s board.

Amer Zahr, a Palestinian-American comedian and the creator of a documentary film called “We’re Not White,” which examines Arab-American identity and the census form quandary, asks, “How do we then become part of the fabric of American society if our government tells us that we don’t exist, they put us in this group that we don’t belong in?”

Like Hispanics, people from the Middle East and North Africa can have complex racial identities that are interwoven with ethnicity and national origin.

Many of the people Mr. Zahr interviewed for his film said they did not feel white or black but distinctly Arab, and felt ignored by the lack of a box. “On stage sometimes I say the real test for

whiteness is whether or not white people think you're white, and white people definitely don't think we're white," Mr. Zahr said.

But for some Arab-American groups, the addition of a census box is not enough. For the past few years, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee has been taking steps toward petitioning the federal government to classify Arab-Americans as a full-fledged minority group.

Ultimately, Congress would have to decide whether or not to grant a group minority status.

Ms. Samhan of the Arab American Institute said the proposal to add a census box was not meant to advocate for the classification of Arab-Americans as a minority group, but to collect more accurate data. "There has always been a lot of difference of opinion about whether or not minority status is a good thing for this population," she said, "which is why we've made it very clear that that is not what we are requesting."

To some, the larger issue is the ambiguous nature of race altogether.

Kenneth Prewitt, a former director of the Census Bureau, a professor of public affairs at Columbia University and the author of "What Is Your Race? The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans," said the problem with asking about race was that it forced people to think about skin color. Mr. Prewitt said asking people about their national origin rather than race would be a more accurate way to classify them. "'What race are you?' is a very complicated question," he said.

***Correction: July 1, 2014***

*An earlier version of this article misstated a word in the subtitle of Kenneth Prewitt's book, "What Is Your Race?" It is "The Census and Our Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans," not "Effort."*